New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1953

Volume XIV, Number 16 • Rachel W. Coffin, *Editor* • Week of September 28, 1953

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NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK POST
NEW YORK MIRROR
NEW YORK WORLD TELEGRAM & THE SUN
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK TIMES

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Yearly Subscription $25.00

Published by CRITICS' THEATRE REVIEWS, Inc., 235 East 22nd Street, New York 10, N. Y.

"Take a Giant Step"

The New York Times

September 25, 1953

Louis Peterson's 'Take a Giant Step' Is the Story of an Adolescent Negro

By BROOKS ATKINSON

By confining himself to things he knows about personally, Louis Peterson has written an original and poignant drama, "Take a Giant Step," which was acted at the Lyceum last evening. It is the story of a boy who is coming of age in a town in Connecticut. Since the boy is a Negro, "Take a Giant Step" has some special characteristics involving racial adjustments. Spencer Scott—for that is the boy's name—has to face some situations forced on him by the external world.

* * *

But one of the best things about "Take a Giant Step" is Mr. Peterson's freedom from formulas and his success in writing with candor about the growing pains of an American boy. Spencer wrangling loyally with his grandmother; Spencer trying to keep from telling his parents that he has been expelled from school; Spencer running away from home and coming home; Spencer quarrelling with his irate father—those are the things that Mr. Peterson has written about with insight into the loneliness of a boy. They could happen to anyone.

Let's admit that Spencer is a cut or two above the average. For all his youth, he has a rough perspective on himself. He knows that he is too hot-tempered, too talkative, too boorish; and he is trying to fit himself into the pattern of the world without inflicting much pain on anyone. But it is a time of anguish for everyone. Since his father and mother love him devotedly, they suffer as keenly as he does; and some of the best scenes show Spencer and his alarmed parents trying to get him back on the normal road through high school into college.

* * *

"Take a Giant Step" is a first play that one might criticize for awkward construction in early scenes, monotonous overemphasis on quarreling and a lack of polish and fluidity now and then. But these things hardly matter in view of Mr. Peterson's gifts as a writer. Although he is honest, he is humorous. Without lacking sympathy for Spencer's discontent, he is aware of its comic aspects. Like Spencer, his perspective is clear. And when the bitter truth has to be spoken he can put it into withering words, as in the case of Spencer's grandmother, who can turn the facts of life into blunt, impassioned declamation when the time comes for plain speaking.

The performance is as tense and straightforward as the play. Eldon Elder has designed a homey and ingenious scenic production that moves easily in and out of Spencer's home. John Stix has directed ably. Since there is nothing false in the play, one should not be surprised by the truthfulness of the performances. Not many performances, however, are so free of theatre clichés and acting platitudes.

Louis Gossett gives an admirable and winning performance as Spencer. The part is so long that it makes "Take a Giant Step" almost a character portrait. Mr. Gossett conveys the whole range of Spencer's turbulence—manly and boyish at the same time, wild and disciplined, cruel and pitying. It is a composite of opposite impulses.

In the brief part of the father, Frederick O'Neal expresses the sort of frustration that comes out in anger. As the grandmother, Estelle Hemsley gives a wonderfully humorous and sagacious performance. Estelle Evans, as the troubled mother; Jane White, as a barroom lady of sorrows; Pauline Myers, as a shrill prostitute; Frank Wilson, as a saloon keeper; Dorothy Carver, as an older woman whose loneliness matches Spencer's—the parts are curiously brief, but all these actors bring their share of warmth and integrity to the play.

"Take a Giant Step" is full of light. Mr. Peterson is neither sentimental nor cynical. Nor is he bitter about the special circumstances that Spencer has to face. As an actor, Mr. Peterson knows his way around the stage. As a writer, he understands and respects the anguish of an adolescent; and he has written a fresh, moving drama.

"TAKE A GIANT STEP"

Play by Louis Peterson; staged by John Stix; settings by Eldon Elder; costumes by Ruth Morley; presented by Lyn Austin and Thomas Noyes at the Lyceum Theatre, September 25, 1953. The cast:

Spencer Scott.....Louis Gossett
Grandmother...Estelle Hemsley
Tony.....Fred Vogel
Iggie.....Bernard Rich
Frank.....Frank Wilson
Man.....Maxwell Glanville
Violet.....Pauline Myers
Poppy.....Helen Martin
Rose.....Margaret Williams
Carol.....Jane White
Lem Scott....Frederick O'Neal
May Scott.....Estelle Evans
Christine.....Dorothy Carter
Gussie.....Robert Bayvic
Johnny Reynolds.....Warren Berlinger
Bobby Reynolds....Tarry Green

Journal American

September 25, 1953

Drama Full of Warmth And Emotional Impact

By JOHN McCLAIN

THE problems of adolescence are tough enough for anyone but they are heightened for Negroes living in comfort in Northern towns, and this is the theme that Louis Peterson has selected for his first play, "Take a Giant Step," which was presented at the Lyceum Theatre last night.

Mr. Peterson is himself a Negro from a Connecticut town, and one gathers that much of what he has written is autobiographical. But that is secondary to the fact that he has constructed a drama of immense warmth and emotional impact.

He points no great moral, he is settling no racial issues. He merely tells the story of a colored boy growing up in a predominantly white community, and he tells it wonderfully well.

Must Have Pride

His hero is a high school lad who has been suspended for a week because he resented something his history teacher said about Negroes in the Civil War. He talked back to her and retired to the boys' room and smoked a cigar.

This is regarded by his father, a respected bank employe, as a heinous offense, and his mother agrees that he must always remain in his place and never speak up to white people.

But his old grandmother, a semi-invalid, comes to his defense. She maintains that the kid must have pride, that his parents should support him in his lonely pursuit of it.

There is a poignant scene in which the old man recants and makes every effort to win back his son's affection. And another when the boy opens his heart to the family maid and finds her singularly receptive.

In the end, after the death of the grandmother, the lad finally comes of age. He has resolved his problems; he doesn't need the companionship of the white boys in the neighborhood; he's going on with his music and his studies and he's going to college.

There is much that is unpolished in Mr. Peterson's writing—I thought the boy's mother was a ridiculously stuffy character, for one thing—but there isn't the slightest doubt that he has an estimable talent.

In the grandmother, some of whose best lines are delivered off-stage, he has created a memorably hilarious personality. I was almost as heartbroken as the hero when she chilled.

Excellent Cast

Of course, the author got none the worst of it by having the part played by Estelle Hemsley, a slight and gifted veteran.

And he is almost equally indebted to Frederick O'Neal, who brings enormous authority to the role of the father. The kid himself, Louis Gossett, turns in an extraordinary performance for a neophyte, employing a faltering but strangely effective delivery and only occasionally over-extending himself.

I wish Estelle Evans, his mother, had sounded less like the class valedictorian rehearsing her speech, but I think that was not her fault. And I liked the efforts of Dorothy Carter, the understanding maid; Jane White, Bernard Rich and Pauline Myers.

This is a good play, if by no means a great one. But in "Take a Giant Step" the author has taken a healthy stride in the right direction.

DAILY NEWS

September 25, 1953

'Take a Giant Step' Is Overlong

By JOHN CHAPMAN

One day soon Louis Peterson should write an excellent play, for his first effort, "Take a Giant Step," shows that he has abundant talent for the drama. With severe discipline he might have made something remarkable out of his maiden effort, for this comedy-drama, which was presented last evening at the Lyceum Theatre, has all the makings. It contains absorbing scenes, vivid characterizations and excellent humor—but Peterson has not learned when to stop a scene and when to discard one when it is unnecessary or irrelevant.

The author is fortunate in the production which has been achieved for him at the Lyceum, for his cast is top-flight, the direction by John Stix is very good and the sets by Eldon Elder are perfect. Louis Gossett, a high school boy making his stage debut, turns in a sensitive performance in the leading role, and he is backed up by any number of good actors, including Estelle Hemsley, Frederick O'Neal, Estelle Evans, Pauline Myers and another youngster new to the stage, Robert Brivic.

Has Two Problems.

"Take a Giant Step" concerns itself with the growing pains of a Negro high-schooler in a Connecticut town. The boy has the usual troubles incident to approaching manhood and the additional one of being a Negro in a white community—so he must, indeed, take two giant steps. He must grow up, and he must accept the fact that he is colored without resentment and without the loss of personal pride and dignity.

The author, with a passionate interest in his own work, has encompassed too much as he shows the youth in his home, in a tough barroom, in the sleazy boudoir of a prostitute, in a rather meaningless illness and in a rather meaningless affair with a hired girl. The best of "Take a Giant Step" is when it is a family comedy, with O'Neal as a blundering and insensitive father, Miss Evans as a nice enough mother and Miss Hemsley as a perfectly wonderful grandmother. Miss Hemsley's performance is a joyous and expert characterization—the most vivid work in the play.

Louis Peterson, like his own young hero, has in this piece taken a long step toward growing up as a dramatist. What he needs next is to have both feet on the ground. I hope he stays in the theatre.

Daily Mirror

September 25, 1953

'Take a Giant Step' Has Raciness, Humor

By ROBERT COLEMAN

The new producing firm of Lyn Austin and Thomas Noyes made an auspicious bow last evening with Louis Peterson's "Take a Giant Step." It is an unusual play that, in our opinion, makes a visit to the Lyceum Theatre well worth while. If it is a bit uneven, it does make its point.

"TAKE A GIANT STEP" has to do with the growing pains of a Negro boy living in a white section of a Connecticut town. He feels left out of things because of his color. He carries a chip on his shoulder. He proves a real problem to his parents, who wish him to have a better life than they have.

Feeling that he is misunderstood at school, let down by his family, he goes on a beer bender in a dive and learns something about the seamier side of things. Disgusted, he returns home. His parents do their best to understand and aid him. Eventually, he finds himself. As the curtain falls, he is on the way to becoming adjusted.

If Peterson is yet to become a master of dramatic structure, he has an amazing knack for creating characters and penning striking dialogue. The result is a genuinely moving and amusing play. He handles a special subject with evocative feeling. And we don't think you will find two more hilarious scenes the length of Broadway than the gin-mill episode and the one where the youngster faces the music back home.

* * *

AFTER AUDITIONING 446 applicants for the role of the perplexed and bitter Spencer Scott, Austin and Noyes discovered Louis Gossett. With but limited experience in high-school productions, he plays the difficult part like a veteran. And it is an assignment that would tax many a veteran.

Estelle Hemsley is wonderful as the boy's salty and sympathetic grandmother. Frederick O'Neal is terrific, too, as the baffled, cantankerous, well-meaning father. Helen Martin, Margaret Williams and Pauline Myers are immensely funny as three shrewd chippies. Salutes are also due Dorothy Carter, Estelle Evans, Frank Wilson and Jane White for other contributions.

We understand that Helen Hayes suggested young John Stix to direct. It was a good suggestion, for Stix has paced the play skillfully and blended its varying moods effectively. Eldon Elder and Ruth Morley have provided excellent sets and costumes.

"Take a Giant Step" introduces several new and welcome talents to our theatre. It has a vitality, a raciness and an emotional impact that we found irresistible. It brings humor and warmth to the stage.

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

September 25, 1953

'Giant Step' Shows Mature Touch

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

Any theater that can produce "Take a Giant Step" must be in healthy shape. This is a presentation to make flourish the hopes and joy of the most doleful critic the entertainment business ever had.

This new play is all the more exciting because of the unfamiliarity of so many of the names associated with it. Here is a mature drama, rippling with fine comedy, making its statement with infinite taste about one of our most difficult contemporary problems.

No Preaching.

Anybody who thinks he is going to be preached at by "Take a Giant Step" is a poor joker. This is memorable entertainment, emotional in the gayest and most moving ways.

It is the story of the short time in the life of a Negro boy, who suddenly at 17 comes face to face with the reality of his position in a tough world, and finds his own hard way to meet it.

The situation is familiar, as Spence suddenly discovers his playmates leaving him out of their fun, at just the age when consciousness of sex begins to dictate their social lives.

He is subtly deserted, just when his own adolescence begins to create new confusing problems. He starts out on a big adventure, to spite the world he has known, but turns and runs when a prostitute takes him seriously.

He loses his beloved grandmother, but only after she has set his parents straight on their mistake in offering him so much material advantage, at the cost of companionship and love.

He allays his touching, laughable young fear that he might die a virgin. And in the end he makes the hard, bold, giant step of cutting himself off from the old friends before they do it to him.

This is like "Ah, Wilderness," with immediacy and a whole new dimension, in its incurable frustrations.

Good Taste, Reserve.

Thinking back over the performance, one applies over and over the idea of good taste to its many ingredients. It is written with fine insight, but always with reserve. Even the richest comedy, outspoken as it is, springs so honestly from character, and is so right, that it never jars.

The direction is applied with the surest sort of dramatic sense. The moods vary, the stops are pulled, the tensions stretch, but the acting never gets out of hand.

There are probably a half dozen performances in "Take a Giant